

CHAPTER III

ARIZONA'S FOOD ASSISTANCE AND NUTRITION FOR SENIORS (FANS)

The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) was one of three grantees that selected an application assistance model to increase elderly participation in the FSP for the elderly nutrition demonstration. Two divisions within DES—the Family Assistance Administration (FAA) and the Aging and Adult Administration (A&A)—designed and implemented the demonstration, known locally as the Food Assistance and Nutrition for Seniors program (FANS). The Arizona Nutrition Network served as the community partner, providing program support and the initiative's nutrition education components. Core services featured peer application assistants (seniors) who prescreened other interested seniors for potential food stamp eligibility and helped them complete the FSP application. FANS application assistants typically met with clients in public locations such as senior centers, food banks, and libraries. Program staff also informed seniors about other social service benefits and resources for which they might be eligible.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

The FANS demonstration provided one-on-one assistance to elderly FSP applicants. The demonstration was implemented in Pinal and Yavapai Counties, with five local DES offices participating. In the absence of the demonstration, seniors in Arizona can apply to several benefit programs with a single application, and homebound seniors can request a home visit from a caseworker if necessary. Arizona requires that all enrollees be photographed for their EBT card and finger imaged. Under the demonstration, seniors waived out of the eligibility interview and, starting in 2003, they eventually could receive 'an exemption for good cause' from finger imaging. Services available through the demonstration included prescreening and application assistance, helping to collect and submit relevant paperwork, and informing seniors about additional resources.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. Arizona uses a combined FAA application which clients apply for food stamps, general assistance, cash assistance, and the state health insurance program. To facilitate completing the form for those who apply for some but not all programs, each field is labeled with a letter corresponding to the relevant program. Applicants need to fill out only those fields that pertain to the program to which they are applying (e.g., *If you want to apply for food stamps, answer all questions identified with the letter “F”*). Applications indicate that language interpreters and staff are available to help seniors fill out the paperwork if needed.

Seniors can obtain an application at the local DES office or request one by mail or fax; they then submit it via proxy, mail, fax, or in person. Caseworkers¹ review the application and call the senior to schedule an appointment, or send a written notice if they cannot be reached by phone. (Same-day eligibility interviews are possible in Arizona, but most applicants must schedule a future visit; in Pinal County, for example, some clients may wait up to three weeks for an interview). If determined eligible for food stamps, seniors are photographed for an EBT card, select and activate a password, and are finger imaged.² Staff estimate that once DES receives an application, the eligibility determination process can take 1 to 15 days, depending on the accuracy and completeness of the submitted documentation.

In the event of a medical condition and/or a severe transportation barrier, seniors can designate a proxy to conduct the interview at the local DES office on their behalf, or request a home visit. Home visits require that homebound applicants have an operating phone line to activate the portable finger-imaging equipment. Alternatively, the senior can choose a proxy to register his or her fingerprints instead; the proxy then is issued an EBT card to purchase groceries on behalf of the client. It is unclear to what extent seniors know about these services or take advantage of them.

The certification period is set by the caseworker at the local office, and all adults must be finger imaged every 12 months as well. DES offers the same flexibility with recertification interviews as it does for first-time applicants. If clients' household characteristics change during the interim period, they must submit a two-page Change Report to the agency, completing information only in the area that the change occurred.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. Several changes went into effect during the FANS demonstration. First, seniors who applied to the FSP did not have to undergo an eligibility interview. Caseworkers determined eligibility solely by reviewing submitted paperwork and clarifying any items through follow-up telephone calls.

¹ In Arizona, caseworkers are known as public service evaluators.

² In January 1998, Arizona implemented a finger-imaging policy to minimize fraud cases. The automated system obtains, transmits, and matches finger images of the right and left index fingers for anyone applying for food stamps or TANF benefits.

Second, in the initial months of the demonstration, seniors had to go to the local DES office to be finger imaged and to activate their passwords and EBT cards. However, due to the recommendation of FANS Project staff and others, an ‘exemption for good cause’ for the finger imaging was obtained for FANS seniors (as well as others) in 2003. Additionally, seniors in the FANS program were exempted from the EBT card photograph. This policy granted DES staff the discretion to waive the requirement that elderly applicants travel to the office. In these cases, a supervisor activated an EBT card and mailed it to the client’s home in a sealed envelope.

To further simplify procedures for seniors, FANS assistants hand-delivered applications to the local DES office on the same day or the next business day. FANS applications were identified with labels so that DES staff knew to flag them in the agency’s database as demonstration clients. With few exceptions (see below), there was usually no further contact between the FANS application assistants and the clients once the paperwork was submitted. Thereafter, caseworkers worked directly with the clients to resolve any issues and request further information.

Most application assistants helped clients who needed to recertify—reminding them of the deadline, helping seniors fill out the forms if needed, and collecting and submitting the paperwork. In addition, a select number of application assistants helped DES caseworkers in the Cottonwood office (Yavapai County) with non-FANS recertification cases, although this was a unique arrangement. The caseworker that most frequently worked with FANS applications sometimes asked certain assistants to call non-FANS elderly clients and review the procedures for recertification with them. From time to time, these application assistants also followed up with first-time FANS applicants (for example, requesting a savings account statement). With walk-in clients, the front desk clerk often determined whether an application assistant was available to help them apply for food stamps.

FANS Service Delivery. The way in which demonstration services unfolded across the two counties varied from region to region. For example, some application assistants chose to work in teams, with one assistant interacting with the client while the other collected and photocopied relevant paperwork. Other FANS staff preferred to work independently. The duration of assistance sessions also fluctuated, depending on factors such as the number of assistants helping the senior, whether the food stamp application was partially completed ahead of time, and whether there was a photocopier on site.³ Still, the overall scope of service delivery remained consistent across sites. Indeed, the project coordinator developed a checklist to help ensure that program staff covered all steps during sessions.

³ Once program staff became familiar with procedures, each session took one hour on average if assistants were working in a team, and if the client was prescreened in advance and brought the appropriate documentation. An average session took one and a half to two hours if the assistant worked alone.

Application assistants delivered services to seniors at a range of outreach sites in public locations across Pinal and Yavapai counties. Senior centers and food assistance organizations were common places where the elderly could access FANS services; other sites included churches, libraries, health departments, and a fire house. For a few towns in Yavapai County, service delivery occasionally took place at the local DES office. Some sites offered private spaces that afforded client confidentiality, such as a conference room or office. At other locations, however, application assistants had to improvise, sometimes setting up a table at one end of a large common area. Table III.1 presents the number of different types of FANS sites that were used over the course of the demonstration.

Table III.1: Types of Fans Outreach Sites in Pinal and Yavapai Counties December 2002 to July 2004

	Pinal County	Yavapai County
Towns targeted for FANS sites	Apache Junction, Casa Grande, Coolidge, Eloy, Florence, Kearny, Mammoth	Clarkdale, Cottonwood, Prescott, Prescott Valley
December 2002 Assistance Sites	5 senior centers, 4 county health departments (Food Plus ^a sites), 1 library	7 senior centers, 2 Food Plus sites, 1 library, 1 community center, 1 food bank
July 2004 Assistance Sites	9 senior centers, 6 county health departments, 1 food pantry (as of Feb. 2004, 3 senior centers and 1 Food Plus site were no longer active)	10 senior centers, 5 Food Plus sites, 4 senior housing complexes, 3 community centers, 3 food banks/pantries, 2 churches, 1 fire station, 1 library, 1 American Legion, 1 Salvation Army (as of Feb. 2004, all sites were active except for 1 food pantry)

Source: Data collected and provided by the Arizona Department of Economic Security.

^a Food Plus is the state name for the federal Commodity Supplemental Foods Program.

At many sites, FANS staff sought to create a regular presence to promote the demonstration as a known resource in the community. For example, application assistants might go to a specific food bank from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every first and third Wednesday. In general, scheduled times ranged from four to seven and a half hours, one to three times each month.

Between 5 and 10 percent of FANS clients received services through home visits. Application assistants mentioned this option whenever seniors spoke to program staff about requesting more information or scheduling an interview slot. However, it is unclear whether all FANS assistants consistently offered this service to interested seniors. Several program staff remarked that home visits were an excellent mechanism to address the stigma barrier and reach homebound elderly. For safety reasons, application assistants tended to work in

teams during home visits, and the project coordinator often waited outside in the immediate area so that staff would feel more secure and comfortable.

If a senior expressed interest in FANS at a community outreach event or by calling program staff, an application assistant scheduled a session and informed the client about which types of documentation to bring to the appointment (for example, Social Security disbursements). If there was time, a FANS assistant also prescreened the senior for potential food stamp eligibility—if for example, an individual approached an assistant after a community presentation. Otherwise, they prescreened at the appointment.

While FANS program staff did not determine benefit eligibility, prescreening provided an estimation of an elder's assets and expenses. This prescreening helped eliminate applications where income far exceeded the cutoff limit, thus saving caseworkers the time of processing these applications. Application assistants entered information into a laptop using software similar to the pre-authorization screening software used by DES. Primary fields included the number of household members, earned and unearned income, liquid resources, shelter expenses, and medical expenses. The software ran a calculation, and quickly indicated if the client was likely to be eligible or ineligible. In some cases, even when seniors appeared to not meet the eligibility criteria, FANS staff invited them to apply for food stamps and informed them of other resources not restricted by, especially food assistance. Otherwise, the assistant scheduled a separate appointment to complete an application so that seniors had time to collect appropriate documentation.

During the FANS interview, application assistants completed the entire FSP application for the client, or completed the remaining fields if the client had already begun the application, such as those obtained in advance of an outreach event. FANS assistants went through the application and asked seniors all questions verbatim. Assistants then photocopied the senior's documentation, either using a copier available on site, using a copier at a nearby store or library, or taking the paperwork to the DES office. In cases where the applicant did not bring all required documentation, the FANS assistant completed an Information Request Form that listed which items clients needed to send to DES, explaining that they had 10 business days to submit the documentation. Program staff then reviewed the (1) Application Assistant Guide to verify information such as evidence of past food stamp fraud and supplemental income/expenses, (2) the Medical Assistance Guide to capture all medical expenses, and (3) the DES Change Report, submitted to a caseworker within 10 business days to report changes in household income, expenses, address, household members, or resource and child support payments.

All seniors were asked to sign an information release form to be used in the event that the caseworker needed to request additional information. After the interview was completed, FANS assistants told them about other social services for which they might be eligible, such as alternative food assistance programs like Food Plus. Staff generally did not help seniors complete these forms. Application assistants then discussed accessing EBT benefits and the purpose of Arizona's finger-imaging system. In the first months of the demonstration, seniors had to go to DES to get photographed for an EBT card and to be finger imaged but the finger-imaging requirement was subsequently waived. Finally, staff

distributed (1) a handbook describing DES' programs, (2) a brochure explaining the EBT system, (3) fingerprint imaging information, (4) a recipe book for creating affordable, healthy meals, and (5) other nutrition education materials.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Arizona's Department of Economic Security (DES) had the primary role in the demonstration, serving as the grantee, providing direct oversight of the application assistants, and conducting public outreach. Program officials from the Family Assistance Administration (FAA) and the Aging and Adult Administration (A&A) took the lead in preparing the USDA grant application. Key policy experts and specialists offered feedback on the demonstration's design and training manual. Representatives from the state training office delivered the training to application assistants. The Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP)—a subdivision of the A&A—provided the initial pool of application assistants. SCSEP administrators screened job applicants and monitored activities on a quarterly basis, such as reviewing timesheets and exploring how participants were progressing.⁴ At the local level, DES managers signed the FANS assistants' timesheets, and caseworkers were available to address any questions or concerns of program staff.

The project coordinator, who was a full-time FAA employee with the Division of Benefits and Medical Eligibility, oversaw the day-to-day operations of the demonstration full time. Since she was based out of the central DES office in Phoenix, she traveled regularly to provide technical assistance and deliver refresher trainings to program staff in Pinal and Yavapai Counties. The coordinator also was in charge of outreach efforts and gave informal updates to the local Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) on the demonstration's progress. The application assistants interacted directly with clients and helped the project coordinator with publicity and outreach efforts.

The Arizona Nutrition Network served as the primary community partner for the demonstration. A state nutritionist with the A&A who was a member of the network supported the project coordinator with outreach and with other tasks as needed. Finally, two local AAAs supplied letters of support for the grant application, suggested and helped confirm FANS sites, and advised program staff on which communities they should concentrate service efforts.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

As the grantee, DES retained responsibility and decision-making authority on policy issues for the elderly nutrition demonstration. The project coordinator was a full-time agency employee, and members of the planning committee also were DES staff.

⁴ Approximately a year after demonstration operations began, the American Association for Retired Persons assumed responsibility from the National Council of Aging for administering SCSEP in Pinal County.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Communication among core program staff and stakeholders was effective sometimes and less so at other times. State officials reported that they worked well together during the planning phase, meeting regularly to share ideas and collaborate on program design. The project coordinator spoke to the local AAAs from each county well in advance of the project's implementation to discuss the demonstration's structure. Staff believed that this early communication helped to develop a strong relationship between the application assistants and local senior centers that served as FANS sites. The coordinator also provided the AAAs with regular updates, at first every month and then quarterly, to keep them informed of FANS activities and progress.

Furthermore, certain application assistants worked well with caseworkers to coordinate FANS applications. For example, two assistants in the Cottonwood office in Yavapai County prepared notes to accompany the FSP applications. These notes described assumptions that the assistants made when filling out the paperwork and highlighted specific questions for the caseworkers. There also seemed to be particularly good communication between DES and FANS staff at another office in Yavapai County.

At the same time, communication between FANS workers and program staff in other local DES offices was sometimes challenging. Poor relations probably derived from several issues. Some FANS assistants did not think that they got enough support from caseworkers, although they acknowledged that DES staff were overworked and stressed from burdensome caseloads. Usually there was one designated liaison at each DES office to handle issues surrounding the demonstration, but during hectic times assistants had to work with whomever was available. It also seems that certain local offices did a better job than others of passing on relevant information about program policies to application assistants.

In addition, local office staff felt that they were not included as part of the planning phase, despite several meetings with demonstration staff. Several local office representatives indicated that they were informed by state officials a week or so beforehand to expect FANS assistants to shadow caseworkers. DES staff felt unprepared and did not receive any guidance on how to train and monitor application assistants. While the project coordinator indicated she made efforts to keep office managers aware of the demonstration during the design phase, it was clear that this information was not well known by many staff in several offices.

Training

A trainer from the DES central office designed and led the initial training for application assistants. The three-day training took place in Phoenix the summer before implementation began; six assistants attended. The training covered program rules and procedures, protocols for dealing with clients, and lessons on using technology (prescreening software and finger-imaging devices). Any application assistants that were hired after operations began were trained by the project coordinator, who reported that she trained nine assistants over the course of the demonstration. In addition, the state nutritionist delivered a two-hour session on strategies to promote healthy eating among the elderly. She discussed

dietary guidelines, food safety, food borne illnesses, and a recipe book for affordable, nutritious meals.

To supplement the three-day training and to become familiar with the FSP's structure, FANS assistants informally observed DES caseworkers process applications. (Program planners intended for this shadowing to last 20 to 40 hours, but often it only lasted for a few hours.) In addition, the project coordinator accompanied FANS assistants for their first field assignment, both for their first application assistance session at a FANS site and their first home visit. She was available for technical assistance at any time, either in person or, more frequently, by cell phone. Approximately half a dozen intermittent refresher trainings were scheduled to reemphasize important elements of the FANS process, such as reviewing financial and non-financial verification paperwork.

Outreach Strategies

Publicity and community outreach were important components of the FANS program, especially because the service area covered two relatively large, rural counties. Program staff utilized various strategies to educate seniors about the program, including posters, community presentations, and referrals from local organizations.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. To combat the stigma that many seniors associate with the FSP, staff stressed nutrition education and maximizing one's food budget, instead of referring to food stamps, public assistance, or DES. The project coordinator emphasized that participating in the demonstration would help the local economy by getting seniors to patronize local grocery stores. She also tried to debunk FSP myths (for example, that enrolling in the program would cause seniors to lose their state-sponsored prescription drug coverage).

For the first several months of the demonstration, FANS staff concentrated outreach in areas with higher population densities. However, outreach in the outlying parts of the counties was very limited or even non-existent. Many residents were geographically isolated, and there were not many public spaces or service providers—government or non-profit—through which staff could reach potential clients, such as by displaying publicity materials or organizing a group presentation. As the demonstration progressed, outreach was expanded to the more rural areas (although outreach efforts in Pinal County always lagged behind activities in Yavapai County). By March 2003, program staff had covered all regions in Yavapai to some degree, whereas there were still some parts of Pinal that needed coverage.

Networking. Program staff 'tabled' (set up a table to pass out materials and talk to interested seniors about FANS) at different community events over the two-year period. They frequently used a colorful display from the Arizona Nutrition Network to attract interest and downplay the public assistance component. Application assistants also distributed sign-up sheets at various FANS sites—usually senior centers and Food Plus sites—to reach potential clients and encourage them to apply for food assistance benefits. They described the demonstration's services and also prescreened for potential FSP

eligibility if anyone expressed interest. Otherwise, seniors scheduled appointments with DES staff.

In addition, the project coordinator delivered a number of community presentations. The Central Office Trainer developed a FANS Project Power Point presentation that the project coordinator used with groups; she also spoke one-on-one with community representatives. Occasionally, the state nutritionist accompanied her and spoke about good nutrition, such as the importance of fresh produce in seniors' diets. By July 2003, the coordinator had delivered 31 talks in Pinal County and 27 talks in Yavapai County at such diverse venues as senior fairs, hunger council meetings, county human services meetings, county advisory meetings, hospitals, senior centers, health fairs, churches, child care conferences, senior housing complexes, Senior Companions/Foster Grandparents, and the Council for Senior Citizens.

Community Collaborations. FANS worked with several local organizations to help educate seniors about the demonstration, although according to the project coordinator, FANS staff recruited more seniors from Food Plus distribution sites and food banks than from senior centers and other locations. Examples of collaborations included:

- Catholic Social Services in Yavapai County was an official FANS site; their staff talked to clients about the program and informed them when application assistants were next scheduled to be on site.
- A handful of senior centers that hosted FANS staff were fairly active in the demonstration. At one senior center in Yavapai County, the director approached seniors to see if they would be interested in getting food assistance, concentrating first on her Title V recipients (i.e., SCSEP participants) and then on those who participated in the congregate meals program and Meals on Wheels.
- Another senior center director in Yavapai collected the name and phone number of any senior who expressed interest in receiving information on a day when an application assistant was not on site. She immediately called the FANS assistant with the information, who then contacted the senior to set up an appointment.
- Staff from the Central Arizona Food Bank and Food Plus sites actively referred clients to FANS staff, who came during regularly scheduled times each month.
- Program staff partnered with the Community Action Human Resources Association (CAHRA) beginning in March 2003. Application assistants joined CAHRA at senior centers and housing complexes in Pinal County during their review interviews for utility assistance.

To reach homebound clients, at least one application assistant from Pinal County accompanied the Meals on Wheels driver on delivery routes to say a few sentences to seniors

about the demonstration and pass out flyers. Due to liability concerns, program staff in Yavapai instead asked the Meals on Wheels driver to distribute flyers and notify seniors that a FANS assistant would call to see if they were interested in receiving more information.

Written Materials. To advertise the demonstration, application assistants hung posters in various locations that the elderly were likely to frequent, such as senior centers, grocery stores, post offices, libraries, Food Plus distribution sites, and farmer's markets. Posters displayed the cell phone number of the application assistant(s) who served that community; some listed the times and locations of the regularly scheduled peer assistance sessions, and indicated that home visits were available. The project coordinator also developed information packets that she mailed to several local organizations, in which she offered to come and speak to the service providers or their clients.

Additionally, the project coordinator arranged several targeted mailings. In 2003, FANS flyers were placed into Meals on Wheels packages in both counties, distributed to home health aides in Coolidge (Pinal County), and inserted into water bills in Yavapai County. The program concentrated on the faith-based community, sending information packets to churches and faith-based groups in both counties within the first several months of the year. The coordinator again distributed materials in the summer of 2003, but only to churches that also participated in the Food Share program.

Multi Media. A brief description of FANS appeared in the community calendars of local newspapers throughout the demonstration. Short articles appeared in senior center newsletters, the Community Housing Authority's newsletters, and church bulletins. Furthermore, write-ups appeared in the Pinal County Network News, an information-sharing resource for non-profit service providers and advocacy groups. In the summer of 2003, the central DES office in Phoenix developed and distributed a press release to 17 local newspapers across the service area.

The demonstration also received exposure on cable television. One station in Camp Verde (Yavapai County) ran two segments on the program, first in January 2003 and again later that year. A featured story was broadcast statewide through the Arizona Nutrition Network during the spring of 2003. Finally, an application assistant from the Cottonwood/Camp Verde area (Yavapai County) appeared on a cable show with a state Food Plus official to talk about various food assistance programs available for seniors.

Perceived Impact of Outreach. Because participation rates in Pinal County consistently lagged behind Yavapai County, evaluators wanted to explore if outreach activities were visible in both regions. Early on, stakeholders agreed that publicity was stronger in Yavapai County. Staff in Pinal County never extended publicity into the outlying service areas of that county. There was also little to no outreach in the towns of Kearny and Mammoth because application assistant positions were never filled there for very long. However, program staff consistently pursued outreach in Yavapai County from the beginning and throughout the demonstration.

Despite outreach efforts by project staff to community-based organizations (CBOs), when evaluators contacted CBOs in both counties, it seemed that word of the

demonstration was not reaching many organizations, especially in Pinal County.⁵ Three Pinal County CBOs and one in Yavapai County had never heard of FANS, while two other groups (one in each county) vaguely recalled being contacted by program staff the previous year. A food pantry coordinator in Chino Valley (Yavapai County) was surprised that she had not heard of FANS since she had been actively involved with Food Plus for years. Only one organization in Yavapai had seen flyers in the community; this also was the only organization in this small sample that did cross referrals to the program. Five representatives expressed an interest in partnering with the initiative; the other one did not because, according to the director, all elderly residents at that senior housing complex were already familiar with the FSP.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

The project coordinator struggled with turnover and vacancies among FANS assistants, particularly in Pinal County. Each county had five funded application assistant slots. During the course of the demonstration, she hired eight assistants who either left the program or did not start. Some positions were filled and were then vacated due to such causes as death or serious illness. Some application assistants left for other reasons, including (1) moving out of state, (2) wanting to spend more time with family, (3) too much stress and responsibility along with another part-time job, (4) not a good fit with their skills and personality, and (5) termination for using a state cell phone for personal calls.

Slots in the Kearny/Mammoth area of Pinal County were never filled for any significant amount of time. The coordinator filled two positions in June 2003, but one of the workers quit by July. As a solution, two application assistants from Yavapai County incorporated the region covered by that worker into their outreach schedules and traveled there once or twice a month. Finally, one application assistant in Yavapai County resigned in July 2004 to pursue another professional opportunity. Because there were only six months left in the demonstration and the remaining FANS assistant for that DES office was experienced, the project coordinator agreed to allow her to handle that region alone without searching for a replacement.

Soon after the demonstration started, DES began to experience staff shortages when caseworkers—who traditionally handled food stamp and TANF applicants—assumed responsibility for county medical services without any new added staff to counterbalance the rise in cases. An early 2002 state report indicated that it took 16.9 caseworkers in Yavapai County to manage the monthly caseloads, but by November there were only 8 caseworkers. Pinal County staff reported a similar trend. A state hiring freeze exacerbated this shift in case management. It was lifted in July 2003, but supervisors reported needing several months to catch up on back-logged FSP applications.

⁵ Interviews were conducted with organizations identified by America's Second Harvest affiliates in Arizona; phone interviews took place in February 2004.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

A handful of changes took place in the overall scope of the demonstration, many of which involved dropping a service or strategy from the design initially envisioned, due to implementation obstacles. Specifically, staff did not use portable finger-imaging and EBT equipment, prepare applications electronically, set up satellite stations, or show an EBT video during peer assistance sessions. On the other hand, during the second year, program staff did conduct a special series of community presentations to promote the \$60 per month in average food stamp benefits for which FANS clients qualified.

Limited Use of Technical Equipment. The planning committee intended application assistants to carry portable EBT and finger-imaging equipment with them so that they could process EBT cards and fingerprints on site. This approach would have saved a trip to DES for those seniors who did not qualify for a home visit from a caseworker. However, the project coordinator abandoned this arrangement for several reasons. To begin with, the equipment was too heavy and cumbersome to carry. Second, some FANS sites did not have a direct fax or phone line to use with the equipment. Finally, some assistants struggled with technology during the EBT training and would likely have had trouble operating the equipment. Instead, through recommendations from the FANS project and others, DES/FAA finger-imaging policy changed to allow ‘exemption for good cause’ from the state for those seniors for whom traveling to DES proved too burdensome. In these cases, the local supervisor activated and mailed an EBT card to the client at home.

Elimination of Plan to Electronically Prepare Applications. Program officials originally wanted FANS assistants to fill out food stamp applications electronically on laptops, print out the applications, and submit them to the local DES office. However, staff found carrying the printers to various sites to be cumbersome and had technical difficulties downloading the applications, so it seemed easier to limit the laptops to prescreening for potential FSP benefit eligibility.

Satellite Offices. Initially, program planners wanted application assistants to set up computer stations and phone lines at each site. Such an arrangement would have enabled them to communicate directly with DES with questions and to send applications electronically or by fax. Essentially, this would have created satellite DES stations. However, demand for FANS services was never high enough to justify setting up a quasi-permanent site. Instead, staff used their cell phones to contact a caseworker if needed.

EBT Video. The project coordinator intended for application assistants to show the video that explained EBT cards at FANS sites, but a confidential space to screen the video usually was not available.

Targeted Community Presentations. At the suggestion of the FNS project officer, the coordinator and state nutritionist delivered a series of 20 specialized joint presentations throughout the summer of 2003 to emphasize that demonstration clients were receiving an average of \$60 in food stamp benefits. Moreover, they also addressed food safety issues and attempted to dispel myths associated with the FSP. Staff distributed a DES brochure listing community and state resources, and the Arizona Nutrition Network donated insulated lunch

bags that seniors could use to transport cold snacks and medications. Application assistants accompanied them to conduct prescreening, although very few seniors took advantage of this service. (The coordinator thought that attendees were too embarrassed to apply in front of their peers.) On average, 25 to 30 participants attended each presentation, which usually took place at senior centers.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The primary goals of the FANS program were to (1) provide FSP information in public spaces frequented by seniors, (2) provide prescreening and application assistance in non-traditional locations, and (3) promote healthy habits using nutrition education materials. With input from community organizations and service providers, the Arizona DES aimed to implement a program that would encourage seniors to apply for food stamps. All stakeholders involved in the design considered peer assistance in non-traditional locations to be a strength of the demonstration.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. DES selected Pinal and Yavapai counties as pilot sites due to their (1) low elderly FSP participation rates, (2) sizable number of senior residents, many of whom lived in rural areas, and (3) proximity to Maricopa County, where the central DES office and project coordinator were located.

Within DES, representatives from FAA and A&A formed a planning committee to develop a work plan and spearhead program development. Members included the project coordinator, an A&A staff nutritionist, two SCSEP managers,⁶ and a DES program specialist who also was a former food stamp manager. The nutritionist and former food stamp case manager from FAA gave input and suggestions for the design. The nutritionist advocated using SCSEP participants to serve as application assistants and in incorporating nutrition education into the demonstration's mission. The former case manager reviewed procedures to ensure that they would be compatible with local DES offices.

Representatives from the Arizona Nutrition Network—of which the state nutritionist was a member—wrote letters of support and reviewed the grant to ensure that it appropriately highlighted a nutritional component. The Association of Arizona Food Banks also wrote letters of support, as did the local AAAs. The project coordinator also asked AAA directors to suggest outreach sites (for example, senior centers and libraries) and geographic areas in which initial outreach efforts should be concentrated. After consulting with the planning committee, the coordinator confirmed the first FANS sites. The DES/FAA trainer developed the training curriculum and manual. Public Service Evaluators from Pinal County role-played the sessions to test the effectiveness of the exercises.

⁶ At that time, SCSEP was under the National Council of Aging in Pinal County and under the Department of Labor in Yavapai County.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

Different outreach activities might have helped bolster FSP participation rates in certain areas. Having more bilingual application assistants in Pinal County⁷ to reach the Spanish-speaking population might have encouraged more seniors to apply for food stamps, particularly since approximately 20 percent of residents speak Spanish (one bilingual assistant worked for FANS for one year of the demonstration). One senior center director suggested that program staff should have utilized certain outreach strategies earlier on, such as proactively advertising the option of application assistance from staff during home visits to Meal on Wheels clients in both counties. Staff also could have distributed materials to all SCSEP workers within the service area; this would have helped them spread the word about the demonstration and they could have applied to the program themselves. Since many FANS staff described the stigma that seniors often feel towards public assistance, providing a box into which they could place their name and phone number instead of having to use an openly-visible signup sheet, might have created a more comfortable way to seek help.

Furthermore, the project coordinator discovered that the effectiveness of different application assistants varied considerably. It might have been useful to institute a quality control process for new applicants and have a probation period to determine whether an individual was appropriate for delivering FANS services. A written job description with a subsequent performance review would have helped inform this process.⁸

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Unique Community Characteristics

The most striking regional characteristic that could have affected elderly enrollment in the FSP during the FANS demonstration was the substantial size of this primarily rural service area. Pinal County covers 5,371 square miles and Yavapai County extends over 8,125 miles. The Phoenix-based project coordinator, who oversaw all application assistants and outreach, estimated that she drove approximately 1,500 miles every two weeks.

An illustration of the vast distances faced by seniors living in outlying towns offers insight into the particular challenges with which program staff dealt. The nearest DES office from Black Canyon City is located 50 miles away; this translates to a 100-mile round trip for seniors. Many residents either could not get someone to drive them to an appointment with a caseworker or could not afford the gas to drive that far. Some communities were

⁷ The project coordinator had difficulty finding appropriate candidates for positions in Pinal County, regardless of their language abilities.

⁸ SCSEP uses a 90-day review process in which a program administrator speaks to the manager in charge (in this case, the FANS project coordinator) to get a sense of how things are progressing. However, this is an informal process that does not rely on clearly-defined outcomes to measure work performance.

unincorporated and had minimal to no public services and spaces, such as senior centers and libraries. Consequently, it was difficult for FANS assistants to reach these residents. Public transportation did not exist except in larger towns, and even those routes and hours of operations were limited. While it is true that DES offered home visits for those applicants who could demonstrate a considerable transportation challenge, it is unclear to what extent seniors knew about the availability of this service.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

The FANS demonstration encountered several complications. First, the project coordinator could not fill two of the vacancies in Pinal County, reducing the program's reach to seniors in that county. Also, some program staff seemed to be less motivated than others and less suited to delivering services to seniors. In addition, the vast number of square miles that FANS covered made staff management and outreach to the elderly population, especially those who lived in more rural-isolated areas, challenging. Finally, program staff reported logistical problems, including delays with the equipment and inadequate privacy for some application assistance sessions.

Hiring and Retaining Staff

The project coordinator struggled with hiring and retaining application assistants, especially in Pinal County. In fact, implementation in both counties was delayed by three months because it took longer to fill some positions. Even after the demonstration began, staff shortages affected service capacity and enrollment rates in Pinal remained lower than in Yavapai County.

Evaluators spoke to an AAA director and two senior center directors to get their perspectives on why it was difficult to fill vacant positions. They suggested that some seniors (1) worried that they would lose some or all of their public assistance benefits if they worked, (2) were anxious about using computers, and (3) were apprehensive about SCSEP jobs with such responsibilities as dealing with paperwork and interacting with clients. While these theories are interesting, they do not shed light as to why it was particularly difficult to find qualified application assistants in Pinal County.

Skill Levels of FANS Application Assistants

DES caseworkers were divided in their views of the FANS assistants' skill levels. When local offices initially learned of the demonstration, they had doubts about the reliability and capabilities of senior SCSEP workers to accurately process food stamp applications. They acknowledged that program staff seemed to receive a good introduction to the FSP and praised the three-day training. However, they maintained that there were too many policy and procedural details to remember from such a brief training session, particularly for an age group traditionally prone to retention difficulties and possibly less comfortable using computers. New DES caseworkers undergo six weeks of on-the-job training, along with careful oversight by supervisors for several months.

Initially, the denial rate for FANS applications was high (45 percent). After prescreening equipment arrived in late November 2002, the approval rates improved. Still, caseworkers reported that applications often contained errors and/or lacked certain required paperwork.⁹ Some of them thought that the demonstration generated more work when they could have spent more time addressing their own backlogged cases. For example, one caseworker from Pinal County said she would always redo the FANS applications because she believed that was more efficient than trying to fix the original applications.¹⁰

It seems that certain personalities might be better suited for the tasks of an application assistant. For example, an extrovert may be more willing to try innovative ways to conduct outreach and publicity. It also became clear that at least one FANS assistant made little attempt to conduct outreach. This application assistant elected to remain at the DES office once a week to do general clerical tasks unrelated to the demonstration, did not put in much effort at creating a presence at other community locations, and disliked driving.

At the same time, some FANS assistants implemented the program well and had good relations with DES. Two assistants at one office in Yavapai County demonstrated that they worked well with clients, submitted appropriate, accurate paperwork, and regularly tried to raise the level of FSP awareness among the elderly. Their performance prompted a caseworker to give them extra case management responsibilities, such as following up with FANS clients once they submitted an application and processing recertifications for non-FANS clients. Similarly, two other assistants cultivated good working relationships with caseworkers, responding quickly to constructive criticism from DES staff and mastering the FANS protocol. These examples demonstrate how effectively procedures could unfold with appropriate staff.

Since SCSEP was run through different local non-profit organizations in Yavapai and Pinal counties, MPR evaluation staff interviewed representatives of both organizations to identify relevant differences. The interviews were inconclusive. No obvious relevant differences were identified, but since the interviews took place after the hiring was done, a full assessment was not possible.

Managing a Large Service Area

Given the vast distances from the central office in Phoenix to various parts of Pinal and Yavapai counties, it was difficult for the project coordinator to provide extensive oversight of her staff, as well as for them to drive the extent that was needed to effectively create a

⁹ It is uncertain if missing documentation was due to the fact that clients still needed to submit it, or if FANS assistants neglected to request it.

¹⁰ Researchers do not think that the number of FANS applications were overly burdensome. Caseworkers who mentioned high error rates also had very few demonstration applicants coming in. In addition, they saved time by not having to do eligibility interviews for FANS applicants.

regular presence in large rural areas. Program staff also reported difficulty conducting outreach in outlying parts of the counties, particularly in unincorporated areas or when seniors were homebound or did not own phones.¹¹ Moreover, because the coordinator could not directly manage assistants on a day-to-day basis, she arranged for local DES managers to sign their time sheets. Some managers were uncomfortable about approving the recorded hours since application assistants spent a considerable amount of time off site.

Using Electronic Equipment

Program staff encountered several problems with laptops, finger-imaging machines, and EBT equipment. First, the laptops were not delivered until four months after the demonstration began, and a refresher course was needed. Application assistants did not incorporate prescreening into help sessions during these four months because it was too difficult and time consuming for many assistants to do calculations by hand. Consequently, DES caseworkers denied a sizeable proportion of FANS applicants who were income ineligible.

Second, by December 2003 the finger-imaging equipment was available only to a few application assistants. The project coordinator eventually decided not to use the equipment due to an insufficient number of machines and because they were heavy and cumbersome for staff to transport. Instead, she obtained an exemption for good cause so that FANS participants did not need to have their fingerprints collected for DES files.

Privacy for Application Assistance Sessions

Some application assistants observed that the places available for application assistance sessions did not offer an environment that was conducive to confidential conversations. Staff at some FANS sites sensed that seniors were sometimes uncomfortable applying for food stamps and sharing personal information in front of friends and acquaintances. Moreover, they speculated that some seniors did not even bother applying through FANS due to this lack of privacy.

Impacts on FSP Participation Rates in Pinal County

While the FANS demonstration resulted in a relatively large net impact on elderly FSP participation rates as compared with the three comparison counties, enrollment was much lower in Pinal County than in Yavapai County. In fact, participation rates in Pinal County were slightly lower (31.6 percent) than trends in the comparison counties (34.0 percent). Table III.2 compares the number of seniors applying for food stamps through the demonstration in both counties.

¹¹ Unlike in Maine, FANS assistants did not do door-to-door canvassing, a strategy that would have been quite difficult in these rural communities.

Table III.2: Number of Applications Submitted Through FANS September 2002 to March 2004

	Sept to Dec 2002	Jan to Mar 2003	Apr to Jun 2003	Jul to Sep 2003	Oct to Dec 2003	Jan to Mar 2004	Total
Yavapai County							
Total applications	145	87	56	94	81	116	579
Pinal County							
Total applications	40	20	14	23	21	18	136

Source: 2002-2004 quarterly reports submitted by the Arizona Department of Economic Security to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

There was an increase in outreach efforts in Pinal County, particularly after the first several months, but these activities did not bring enrollment closer to the number of applicants in Yavapai County. One DES manager even blocked off a regular time slot on Fridays, during which time caseworkers would only process FANS applications. However, the demand for staff time was not evident and she eliminated the time slot. During the second MPR site visit, one caseworker in Pinal recalled only a few FANS applications coming through her office in the previous month.

Evaluators speculated that some variation in participation rates between the counties was due to staffing issues in Pinal County. Demonstration procedures were more or less the same in both areas, but vacant positions and somewhat less motivated staff may help explain the divergent rates.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

Despite several challenges, the FANS demonstration generated several successful outcomes. Application assistants assumed much of the burden for seniors in applying to the FSP and helped link them to other community resources. The initiative also eliminated the eligibility interview for applicants, which saved caseworkers time and enabled seniors to receive food stamp benefits sooner.

Navigating Paperwork and Peer Support

Many stakeholders liked the peer application assistance model. In their opinion, working with peer assistants appealed to seniors who felt stigmatized or intimidated about going to the local DES office and applying for food stamps. Moreover, seniors were grateful

that ‘someone like them’ handled the paperwork in a non-threatening and supportive environment. One service provider applauded the demonstration, remarking that “the agency [DES] came to the people.” In a customer service survey administered by DES to clients from July 2002 to September 2003, the vast majority of respondents (25 out of 26 total) reported that application assistants patiently explained procedures, answered their questions, and demonstrated courtesy and respect. Seniors also indicated a preference for working with a FANS assistant rather than a caseworker and praised the program overall.

Higher FSP Benefits

As was the case in Maine, there seems to be anecdotal evidence that application assistants helped seniors to better document their household expenses. Capturing all costs (for example, medical visits and prescriptions) as accurately as possible potentially enabled more seniors to qualify for the FSP and receive higher benefit levels.

FANS Saved Time for DES Caseworkers

Under the demonstration’s protocols, eligibility interviews were waived for seniors who applied through FANS, saving caseworkers an estimated average of 10 to 15 minutes per applicant (estimated savings in some Yavapai County offices were higher). For example, in one office, application assistants were able to follow up on those applying through the demonstration, and sometimes handled non-FANS clients who needed to be recertified. Given staff shortages and higher caseloads throughout the agency, caseworkers said they appreciated that application assistants helped alleviate their case burden. DES staff from another Yavapai office reported that FANS applications were usually ready to be entered into the database, or simply needed to be placed on hold until outstanding verification paperwork arrived. Follow-up calls to clarify information or ask for additional paperwork were the exception rather than the rule at this office.

Faster Access Than Non-FANS Clients

Because the implementation of the elderly nutrition demonstration coincided with a state hiring freeze and higher caseloads, FANS applicants seemed to enroll in the FSP faster and received benefits sooner than if they had applied on their own—most likely because they did not have to wait for the next available eligibility interview appointment. In certain regions, caseworkers estimated that, with the exception of expedited cases, non-demonstration applicants waited three weeks to two months for their food stamp benefits to be activated.